The Whispering Gallery

IT occurs to us that the great public figures of to-day, by reason of a certain literary trend, are somewhat in the position of a man who has the privilege, if it may be called that, of witnessing his own funeral.

Never before in the history of the world have famous men been given such an opportunity of sitting up with the corpse of their own greatness, be it real or imagined. It is not so long since that it was considered indelicate to print intimate observations of men during their life time, whatever might be said of them orally.

That taboo has about as much vogue to-day as the petticoat. Personally, we have a notion that when a statesman engages a new secretary nowadays he says to himself: "I suppose this fellow will be getting out a book in a few months, 'What I Know About His Nibs' or 'Under the Premier's Skin.'"

The public sees the great, and they see themselves, mirrored, close upped, revealed and interpreted. The public appetite for these revelations appears to be insatiable. It's a healthy trend, and a normal appetite, but we wonder what old Attila the Hun would think about it, or even the good Queen Victoria!

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When we looked over the book announcements and saw listed there the fifth volume of Edward Channing's "History of the United States," we smothered a yell of triumph. Here was a book about which we could enlighten our readers without so much as a glance at the chapter headings.

For when we were a junior at Harvard it was our privilege, and a pleasant one, to sit twice a week in the big lecture room at Sever Hall and listen to a stout little gentleman with the brightest eyes ever placed in a human head while he discoursed forcibly and often explosively on the rum traffic in the early days of Massachusetts.

It may be to our discredit, but about all we can remember of the lectures that dealt with Colonial history up to the Revolution, in the way of concrete knowledge, is the fact that some of the best Massachusetts families founded their fortunes on rum. Prof. Channing is partly to blame for that. He used to roar the word rum like a buccaneer, and we can vouch for the fact that he used it—the word, that is—repeatedly.

It was his particular joy to blast away at the conventional dogmas of school book history. He assured us solemnly that Washington never took command of the Continental army under the Washington elm in Cambridge. Nor did he hesitate to inform us that not all the ploughs were left standing in the fields when the call to arms came in 1775, as some of the histories would have us believe. He didn't use the word slacker, but that was only because it hadn't been coined then.

And so we can say this much about the fifth volume of Prof. Channing's history, which covers, by the way, the period 1815-1848—that it is the work of a man who looks his facts over carefully before he swallows them, and is not deceived because they have passed unchallenged as truth by those who have written before him.

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Our recollections of Prof. Channing's class moved us to dig into an old box of papers, in which we discovered several erudite essays on early American history. As we read them over we were much impressed with the manner in which they marshalled historical evidence, with their casual references to men and measures that we could have sworn we had never heard of, and their sage discernment of the mistakes made by the fathers of the Republic.

We could not immediately believe that the name signed to these essays was our own, but there it was. The matter they contained was just as new to us as it was when we wrote them for History 10. We fell into a dark meditation on the fruits of college learning.

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The publication in book form of Don Marquis's "Noah an' Jonah an' Cap'n John Smith" has its drawbacks—for Don Marquis. We should not like to state here how many times we personally read "Noah an' Jonah" in The Sun Dial, "reprinted by request," for while it might reflect creditably upon the quality of the poem, we are sure it would do Mr. Marquis no good with his employers, and therefore we refrain.

But we cannot refrain from saying that we think "Noah an' Jonah" is the best fish story ever told, in verse or out of it, unless we except a piece about a Mr. Hoskins, a remarkable bullhead whose career, which ended in his being drowned, was told in a book called "Prefaces." We believe the story of Mr. Hoskins also appeared in The Sun Dial. How often we cannot say.

Nor is there any lack of delight in the verses that follow the title poem. Especially good are the pieces of downright nonsense, or of nonsense with a tincture of philosophy.

We like particularly the fable of the man of science who had spent so much time looking at little things that he forgot the importance of the big ones. He got so he couldn't see anything whole. One day he looked at the sun through his microscope.

"God bless my soul," said the sun "Am I deceived, or is there somebody actually looking at me through a microscope!" . . .

A moment later the scientist's wife said to him,

"George, I smell something burning!"

"I don't smell anything," said the man of science, "but I have an odd pain in my head."

"George," said his wife, "you poor fool, I think it is you that I smell burning."

"I think you are right, my dear," said the scientist, "I believe my eye is fried!"

"Just like an egg," said his wife, looking at it.

For if you persist in ignoring the big things, says Mr. Marquis, they'll take their revenge, sooner or later, tragically or grotesquely.

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We are waiting impatiently for the next volume of poems by Vachel Lindsay. He has recently published two of the finest things he has ever done—"Johnny Appleseed," in the *Century* and "When Gypsy Fiddles Cry," in the London *Mercury*.

"Johnny Appleseed" tells the story of the eccentric pioneer who followed westward in the wake of the first settlers, planting orchards as he went. The poem is as thoroughly American as a stack of buckwheat cakes, as native as a pine cone. It fires the mind to the great push across the Appalachians, and to the vision of the men who made it. Nobody writing to-day, to our mind, has grasped the poetry of America as surely as Lindsay has.

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We have just been reading the worst college story in a decade, "Ring Bone," by Jonathan Brooks, in the December *Metropolitan*. Zenith University, a Middle West institution which has just graduated itself out of the correspondence school class, secures a game on the Harvard football schedule. Toady Tomlinson, the coach, packs the lineup with ringers, and Capt. Horace Wilkins of Zenith, inspired by love for the president's daughter, refuses to go in as quarterback when the game is called. The ringers are retired by the Harvard attack, and then Horace dashes from the side lines, takes command of the old team and gives Harvard a terrible battle.

The game is over. "A newcomer thrust Toady and the ringers to one side, and reached a brawny hand to the sorely wounded boy.

"'Where's the captain?' he demanded. 'Are you the captain of the Zenith eleven?' he asked of Horace. 'Have an arm. Man, I want to congratulate you. Shake! My name's Whistler. The boys want me to say we liked your game, and your nerve. You've got a fine fighting bunch. And I want to say for myself that you're the finest quarterback I've ever seen play football. Will you shake?'

"This was too much for Horace and the tears welled up in his eyes again. It was the Harvard captain speaking."

On the train the next morning Horace is eating breakfast with the president's family.

"'Horace,' said Ethel timidly, 'hadn't we better tell them?'

"'You tell them, or no, I shall—well, let's,' stammered the sturdy hero of the Harvard game."

Shades of Oliver Optic!

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We were a bit late in getting round to the reading of Edna Ferber's "The Girls," but once started we gobbled it. Now that we have read it we find it hard to believe that this is the same Edna Ferber who wrote about Emma McChesney some years back. She has made big strides since. "The Girls" is a human and a pungent book, written with that irony which runs increasingly full in the better American novel. One might say, of course, that a good novel is necessarily ironic, because life is that. But we all know persons who seem always to be saying to themselves lest they forget it, "Life is real, life is earnest."

You will like "The Girls" for its vigorous picture of Chicago sprawling into being, for its drama of the one generation always pitted against the one preceding it; for its clear sighted and humorous perception of the absurdities that are in the life of every one of us.

We took great joy in Ben Garth, stolid, businesslike, stodgy Ben Garth, who at one point in the story "presented that most pathetic and incongruous of human spectacles—a fat man, in a derby, at a picnic."

Ben was one of those men who have nothing to distinguish them from a million others of their kind, yet listen to him circling round a proposal to Lottie Payson:

"I guess I'm a funny kind of fella, anyway. Different from most. . . . I've been around a good deal. I've had my ups and downs. I know this little old world from the cellar to the attic, and I don't envy anybody anything. . . . I don't know. I guess I'm a funny fella. Different. That's me. Different."

DONALD ADAMS.